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ABSTRACT

The lack of interest in the development of competent principals who can serve as instructional leaders of reading programs is apparent in three areas: (1) lack of clearly defined research on the role of the principal in the reading program (2) lack of involvement of reading professionals in setting standards for evaluating, certifying, and licensing elementary principals; and (3) lack of college courses designed to help principals become effective instructional leaders in reading. The first area can be addressed by carrying out carefully planned, long term ethnographic studies of the role of the principal in developing and maintaining an exemplary reading program; through such studies, factors that both encourage and inhibit principal-staff interaction in developing effective reading curricula may be discovered. The other two areas can be addressed by reading professionals actively lobbying for higher certification standards, and by required reading courses for principals that stress both fundamental reading knowledge and the role of the principal in building a strong reading program. (HOD)

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PROBLEMS COURT

THE ROLE OF THE READING EDUCATOR IN THE TRAINING OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Introduction

It is almost axiomatic in professional education circles that the principal exerts a great influence on the quality of the elementary school reading program. In his discussion of the role of the principal, Georgiades (1985) states: "Leadership at the local building level is a key factor in the improvement of the quality of instruction. A school is but a reflection of its principal." However, reading educators have generally given little attention to the role of the building principal in the reading program. Little research has been done which focuses on the role of the principal rather than on the role of the teacher or learner. This lack of interest in the development of competent administrators can be seen in the Program for this year's American Reading Forum "Evaluation in Reading". Although the evaluation of administration formed one strand of a three strand theme; only a small percentage of papers submitted dealt with the evaluation of the administration of reading programs. This Problems Court will address the lack of participation by reading professionals in training elemmentary school principals who can be instructional leaders in the area of reading. This lack of interest in the development of competent principals who can serve as instructional leaders of reading programs is

apparent in three areas: 1. the lack of clearly defined research on the role of the principal in the reading program; 2. the lack of involvement of reading professionals in setting standards for evaluating, certifying and licensing elementary principals; and 3. the lack of college courses designed specifically to help principals become effective instructional leaders in reading.

Problem One

Although research clearly shows the strong influence of the building principal on the quality of the school reading program, research by reading professionals to help us understand the role of the building principal in the reading program is noticeably lacking. The findings of the Ford Foundation in its report, A Foundation Goes To School (1976) are paralleled by the findings of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in the Model Schools Project (1978). One of the key findings of both of these studies was that the most significant person in the change process in schools is the building principal. In the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study (1980) conducted by the Educational Testing Service and the Far West Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, "successful" schools were compared to "unsuccessful" schools. A major finding from the research in the "successful" schools is that in productive schools the principal acts as an assertive instructional leader

and also assumes responsibility for the evaluation of achievement. In a three year study of school leadership (1976), The National Consortium for Humanizing Education found that the principal has a vitally important role in the school and that, in many ways, he or she models roles and behaviors which teachers and children tend to adopt. A study by the Council for Basic Education (1971) noted that in four inner-city schools that were teaching reading successfully, strong leadership was one characteristic common to all four schools.

However, reading research in the schools has focused primarily on the roles of the teacher and the learner and very little research has been done concerning the role of the principal in the reading program. It is naive to assume that improving the performance of individual teachers will result in a well balanced program of instruction throughout an entire school. We have little concrete evidence which shows how the behavior of building principals affects the reading program either positively or negatively. Often reading researchers have been content to summarize leadership studies done by others and to generalize these results to the reading program. This summarizing of general studies leads to vague suggestions for admiminstrators which are not really reading specific, such as "a principal must have clear goals for the reading program, a principal must set up a climate conducive for learning, a principal must have expectations of success for all students, and a principal must take the

lead in instructional planning." These suggestions, given to a principal with little formal training in reading, are not very helpful as he/she struggles to build a strong reading program.

Solution One

The role of the building principal in the reading program is complex and many faceted. However, it is necessary to understand some of the complexities if we are to help principals. Reading researchers need to join with other educational professionals to study specific ways in which the behavior of the principal affects the reading program. Carefully planned, long term ethnographic studies of the role of the building principal in developing nad maintaining an exemplary reading program are needed. Factors which both encourage and inhibit principal-staff interaction in developing effective reading curriculums need to be discovered.

Problem Two

Reading professionals need to take a more active role in the formal preparation of elementary principals. In many instances the reading professionals have considered the training of administrators to be "outside of their province" while they concentrated on the teaching/learning environment within the classroom and the training of classroom teachers. Unfortunately, preparation programs for most administrators emphasize

school law, school plants and facilities, school finances, and management techniques, and very little emphasis is placed upon instructional methodology and curriculum development. Standards for certifying administrators in most states do not stress reading.

The certification standards for principals were obtained from 47 states and carefully analyzed for this paper. There was no state that specifically listed courses in reading as a requisite part of the certification standards for principals. Many of the state certification officers stated, however, that a pre-requisite to administrative certification was either elementary or secondary education certification and that at least one course in reading was required for this certification. Therefore, they assumed that a reading course would have been part of an administrator's training.

All states, however, required proof of specific competencies in school finance, school law, and administrative theory before administrative certification would be given. Thirty three states required a course in special education. Courses in specific curriculum subjects were usually grouped, and courses or competencies were required in certain areas. It is possible to fulfil the competency requirement in curriculum areas with a combination of courses in a variety of subjects or two or three courses in one subject. Reading courses could be taken as part of the curriculum area, but they would not have to be. No state

specifically required a course in reading methods for certification as a principal. Therefore, if a candidate applying for administrative certifcation had received elementary or secondary certification before reading courses were mandatory, it is very possible that a candidate could receive administrative certification without taking any courses in reading. A strong special education lobbying effort made courses in special education mandatory for administrative certification. Perhaps a lobbying effort by reading professionals is needed to make courses in reading mandatory for elementary principals.

After the analysis of certification standards was complete, 149 elementary building principals in three states were interviewed by telephone. Each principal was asked the number of reading courses which he/she had taken. The sample contained 118 men and 31 women. Of the 149 subjects, 32 principals reported having had no course in reading at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Of the 149 subjects, 74 principals reported having had one undergraduate or graduate reading course, and 31 had two or three formal courses in reading. Twelve principals reported that they had taken four or more reading courses. Of these twelve principals, nine were female. The majority of the 32 elementary principals who reported taking no reading courses were former secondary school teachers who were serving as elementary school principals.

It is not suprising that building principals, two thirds of whom had none or only one course in reading, did not feel qualified to show strong leadership in the area of reading.

Solution Two

Reading professionals need to become actively involved in setting up certification standards which would make reading mandatory for all elementary principals. Principals will choose the tasks which they feel most comfortable doing when they define their roles; principals with training in reading and language arts programs will be more apt to show leadership in the reading program.

Problem Three

Building principals are generally reluctant to become highly involved with reading program leadership because they feel inadequately trained to do so. In the few instances when they do become involved, it is generally to implement one or two strategies which they feel work well. However, in very few instances does the elementary school principal assume a highly visible and responsible role in the development of a balanced reading program without special encouragement. It is the duty of the reading professionals to help principals develop these sets of leadership skills in reading.

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At this point, however, reading educators are not reaching the building principals through their courses. For this paper the enrollment in the reading courses of three universities was surveyed to find out whether these reading departments were serving administrators or administration trainees. In the course which dealt with the administration and supervision of reading programs during one summer school semester, 56 students were enrolled in the courses. Of these 56 students, 5 students were principals and 2 students were working on administration certification. In the graduate developmental reading course 105 students were enrolled. Of these 105 students, two were principals and three students were working on administration certification. In the remedial reading courses, 62 students were enrolled. Of these students, none were principals and two were working on administrative certification. Thus existing reading programs are generally reaching few elementary principals.

Solution Three

Principals need to be encouraged to take introductory reading courses to learn the basic fundamentals of reading. College and universities need to do active recruiting among principals and encourage them to attend reading classes.

However, colleges also need to help principals develop and maintain an excellent school wide reading program. A careful perusal of many course syllabi in reading departments shows that

little attention is given to this aspect of developmental reading. A course designed specifically for building principals could have a two-pronged focus; the first part could stress fundamental reading knowledge, and the second part could stress the role of the principal in building a strong reading program. This special course for principals also needs to be marketed carefully so that building principals realize that these courses could help them. And finally, reading professionals should encourage educators with strong curricular knowledge to enter administration.

Summary

This problems court addressed the major issue of the lack of participation of many reading educators in the development of effective elementary school principals. The major problems discussed concerned the lack of research in the role of the principal in the reading program, the lack of reading professionals' participation in the development of licensing and certification standards, and, the lack of courses taught specifically for administrators of reading programs. The solutions suggested include the need for careful research into the role of the principal in the reading program, the active lobbying for higher certification standards and required reading courses for elementary principals, and finally, the development of courses

which will show principals how to develop and evaluate strong reading programs.

Kurth, American Reading Forum, 1985

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